

Writing History Vs. Writing the Historical Novel

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I would like to begin my remarks today on history and the historical novel by thanking the organizers of the Helena Festival of the Book and the Montana Historical Society for the opportunity to participate in this year's festival, not only because it provides me with chances to meet Montana writers and be introduced to their work, but also because it offers the occasion to revisit a state for whose landscape and people I have developed a great admiration and fondness.

Having said that, I must also confess a certain uneasiness at this moment, the uneasiness of the interloper and trespasser. After all, I have written two novels, *The Englishman's Boy* and *The Last Crossing*, which are set in part in Montana, a place that is not mine and which as a Canadian I cannot pretend to know intimately, or inhabit imaginatively in the way that would be second nature to a native Montanan. For someone in my position, there is always the feeling that the three-legged stool you thought you had sat down on has proved at best to have two legs, and maybe only one. So I tender both an apology and an excuse, my only justification for invading your turf is that although my characters *start* their journeys in Fort Benton, Montana, I get them across the border and into Canadian territory as quickly as possible.

I wish to make one other point, and that is that in the time in which my novels are set (the 1870s), the border between Canada

and the United States was a work in progress, remarkably fluid and remarkably porous. The American historian, Paul Sharp, argued this over fifty years ago in his book, *Whoop-Up Country*, which explored the economic and political connections that existed between Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri, and the hinterlands of present-day Saskatchewan and Alberta, an era in which taxes in Fort Benton could be paid in either American or Canadian currency, a circumstance that, for a Canadian living now with the burden of an eighty-some-odd cents dollar, seems too marvellous to be credited.

The great American writer, Wallace Stegner, in his wonderful memoir *Wolf Willow*, also dwells on the mingling of American and Canadian culture he experienced during homesteading days when his family shifted across the border with the frequency and alacrity of nomads. And, of course, the Canadian historian Hugh Dempsey, among others, has also written extensively on the Montana/Canada connection.

It is in this tradition that I have worked for the past decade and I provide it as context for my struggle to become an historical novelist, to attempt to understand what I was doing, why I was doing it, and what obligations I owed to the rendering of the past as a writer of fiction. Of course, this matter is not settled for me and never will be because the historical novelist is placed in the awkward position of deciding where to offer his or her allegiance, to history or to the novel.

At one point I aspired to become an academic historian, but strayed and fell by the wayside. This apostasy started in graduate school, where I stole time that was supposed to have been used to research a master's thesis and frittered it away

by guiltily writing short stories—a warning for anyone who supervises graduate students. Watch them closely; otherwise they may end very badly indeed.

By the time I had completed a master's degree in history—just a teeny bit late due to extra-curricular literary activities—I realized I was temperamentally disqualified from becoming a professional historian. In his famous essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” Isaiah Berlin quotes a line from the Greek poet Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” What had originally attracted me to the study of history was the wide-ranging nature of the discipline, touching on so many subjects: economics, politics, philosophy, sociology, constitutional studies, art, science, military matters, diplomacy—the list is endless. History *had* seemed the ideal match for someone like me who was constitutionally a fox, or perhaps more truthfully, a dilettante.

What I failed to recognize back then was that while the *reading* of history is the activity of a fox, the *writing* of history is essentially the activity of a hedgehog, an attempt to use the tools of analysis to make intelligible a myriad of detail and to synthesize it into some over-arching meaning. Wallace Stegner put it succinctly in discussing the work of his good friend, Bernard DeVoto, who wrote both fiction and history.

The historian reserves the right of judgment, the right of manipulating time, the right of doing things simultaneously, of being in all minds at once, of being, in other words, omniscient....

A novelist these days is seldom judgmental

or omniscient in the historical sense. [Bernard DeVoto] was much better at the historical judgment, holding a lot of facts in his head, seeing the whole picture, making these pieces fit the picture, and being a god manipulating the machine, than he was at being a ventriloquist and speaking out of a single mouth, or, as he would have to, if he were a real fictionist, speaking serially out of many mouths. Faulkner could speak out of any mouth and still be absolutely right. That's a major difference between a Benny DeVoto and a Faulkner.

I was more suited to play ventriloquist than adopt the single, rational voice of the historian. This was not a matter of choice, of deciding one point of view was better, grander, more worthy than the other, but a simple recognition of what I could and could not do.

So history and I parted ways and I commenced to write short stories and novels which one reviewer recently characterized as “dark, claustrophobic, domestic dramas.” Nevertheless, while toiling away in the satanic mills of dark, claustrophobic, domestic drama, I retained my love of history, and in an amateurish fashion continued to read it. For fifteen years, I made no attempt to manifest this interest by incorporating historical matter into my fiction. The simple reason was that I suspected that the historical training I had received would tie me up in knots, that I would be too concerned with accuracy, fairness, and rigorous interpretation to reconcile

these elements with the aesthetic demands of the novel.

However, in the 1990s on an excursion to the Saskatchewan Archives I stumbled upon an intriguing sentence in the Annual Report of the Saskatchewan Department of Public Works, the government body charged at the beginning of the twentieth century with the administration of the North Battleford Asylum for the Insane. That sentence acknowledged the assistance provided by patients who had taken over many of the duties of the medical and support staff during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1919. This one cryptic remark became the basis for a play that featured a shell-shocked veteran of the Great War, his struggles with the rigid Superintendent of the Asylum, and the devastation visited on patients and those in charge of the asylum by the outbreak of the flu. In trying to research the play, I discovered that there was very little material to draw on; most records from the period had been lost, destroyed, or were otherwise unavailable. The little that was extant provided some arresting material, rumours of scandal in the running of the institution, an investigation into the death of an inmate that hinted at abuse, some insight into treatments employed. I supplemented this information by reading works on the evolution of psychiatric treatment, a few standard medical textbooks of the time, as well as histories and memoirs of the Great War to provide background and context. In the end, however, the play was almost totally imagined, filled with invention and speculation. Despite being in some sense “historical,” the writing of the play relied on instinct, and was fuelled by guesses about the meaning of that single sentence that appeared in the Annual Report of the Department of Public Works. There were too many gaps in the record for me to be contradicted, and the unknown

provided me with a measure of confidence, soothed my conscience over the matter of fidelity to the historical record.

This initiation was liberating, and I began to see the past not so much as a daunting minefield, but a fertile pasture of rich incidents and stories that could be exploited by a novelist. The play, “Dancock’s Dance,” was followed by two novels, *The Englishman’s Boy*, a book loosely based on the massacre of Assiniboine Indians by a band of wolfers in the early 1870s, and *The Last Crossing* in which Jerry Potts, a figure out of Montana and Western Canadian history and closely identified with the North-west Mounted Police, makes an appearance. Despite my experience with the play, writing these books proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. The residue left by my historical training led me to be suspicious of the impulses of the novelist, and the novelist resisted what remained of the historian. One part of me agreed with those historians who see “faction” or “fictory” as the work of magpies who pick all the shiny, entertaining bits from the past, tart them up a little more, and then try to pass these gaudy trinkets off as the real goods—Gresham’s Law at work, bad currency driving out good. The other part of me kept whispering that my duty was to serve the characters; the story came first, to hell with considered judgment. I found I was constantly asking my divided self what I was up to, or should be up to.

The first question I had to attempt to answer was: What defines the historical novel? The easiest answer is a novel whose action is set in the past. But the passage of time ensures that this is a description that will, inevitably, apply to all novels. For Jane Austen’s first readers, *Pride and Prejudice* was contemporary fiction, but from our standpoint her characters live, breathe, and scheme in

a world far removed from our own. At some point, even the work of relentlessly contemporary novelists such as John Updike will inevitably find itself embedded like a fly in the amber of the past. Eventually, I concluded that what distinguishes novels merely set in “long-ago days” from true historical novels is the consciousness of, and concern for the subject of history itself that such books display. They are written out of a belief that the unseen hand of history is everywhere at work in the present, that history is one of the ways by which we come to understand ourselves, not only as beings in society, but also as individuals. In this way, paradoxically, historical novels are also modern because they are interested in discovering how and why we have become what we are—perhaps to an even greater degree than conventional history—and they tend to blur the emotional distinction between past and present. To quote T.S. Eliot’s poem “Burnt Norton,” “Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.”

In an attempt to support this proposition, I will have to refer to my own novels, *The Englishman’s Boy* and *The Last Crossing*, for no other reason than I have access to the motivations behind the writing of them. I apologize for this since most of you will be unfamiliar with these books, but this puts you in good company—the vast majority of humanity isn’t. So I hope you will bear with me.

When I embarked on the writing of *The Englishman’s Boy*, I was not completely conscious of what I was up to—novelists seldom are. But in retrospect, it’s not surprising that living in a media-obsessed age I should write a novel chronicling the beginning of the Hollywood dream factory, or that faced with

daily evidence of the resurgence of fascism I should reflect on the political uses of film in political propaganda, two strands present in that novel. Or that living in Western Canada where the relationship between First Nations’ people and those of European descent is presently so fraught, that this novel should consider the political consequences of the Cypress Hills Massacre, a scarcely remarked incident in Canadian history that, I believe, had momentous consequences for the future of my country. Likewise, *The Last Crossing* contemplates a moment in Western Canadian history that decisively marked the passing of the old way of life for aboriginals, and tries to employ the figure of the scout and mixed-race Blackfoot warrior, Jerry Potts, as the embodiment of what I consider to be the shared history of whites and natives, not a story of two races inhabiting absolute, separate, and remote existences in the West.

With time, I also came to believe that one of the truly distinguishing features of most historical novels is that capital H History, directly or indirectly, achieves the status of a character. This is most apparent in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, animated as it is by Tolstoy’s mystical notion that it is the common people, attending to their daily lives and unaware of great events, who further the unknowable, unconscious motions of history, rather than the Napoleons who vainly believe they control historical forces but are, in reality, no more than history’s puppets. While this tendency to “characterize” history is most marked in Tolstoy, who appended a theoretical essay about the nature of history to *War and Peace* just in case anybody missed his point, it is also true of all the great classic historical novelists, those who set the standards for all who followed. As the Marxist literary critic

George Lukacs pointed out, Walter Scott conceived of the history of the British Isles as the triumph of a “middle way.” In *Ivanhoe*, the struggle between Saxon and Norman achieves reconciliation in King Richard, foreshadowing the founding of a nation that will be neither Saxon nor Norman, but English. And by implication, Walter Scott may also have optimistically anticipated the fusion of Scots and English into a nation that would be neither, but simply British. Stendhal, whose historical consciousness was formed by French Enlightenment and Revolutionary thought, views Italian political intrigue in *The Charterhouse of Parma* through the lens of the *philosophes*, and Napoleon hovers over every one of the hero’s actions as a presiding spirit, and guide. The work of Pushkin, Gogol, Balzac, and James Fenimore Cooper all demonstrate similarly strong, personal conceptions of what history is and how it is to be understood. Among our contemporaries, Gore Vidal is possessed of equally passionate notions. His certainty that the United States turned its back on republican virtue for the blandishments of imperial glory is an argument that runs through all of his historical novels set in America.

Even postmodernism’s version of the historical novel, labelled by some critics as historiographic metafiction, places history at centre stage, even though centre stage often holds a prisoner’s box. Sceptical about master narratives, the objectivity of history and the coherence of identities, postmodernists typically rewrite the past from the point of view of those who have been victimized (women, native peoples, gays, etc.). The postmodern attitude has greatly influenced all current writers of historical fiction, often nudging them to be the first into fields that were largely ignored by historians.

Adopting an even more radical stance, some historiographic metafictionists go one step further, knowingly disrupting chronology, introducing supernatural occurrences and obviously historically inaccurate elements to remind the reader that history is a relative construct, riddled with subjectivity. The more wild-eyed of the postmodernists refuse to admit any real separation between fiction and history since both, in their view, are human-made “ways of world-making.”

Now it comes as no surprise to any historian (unless his name happens to be Rip Van Winkle) that history is in some sense “subjective.” Jacob Burkhardt conceded the point over a hundred years ago. But because history, like the novel, displays subjective elements does not necessarily mean they are one and the same thing. While it is true historians are not granted exemption from the cultural conditioning undergone by novelists or even barroom raconteurs, surely the stories they create are significantly different because historians, unlike novelists, rest their cases on something called evidence. Like evidence offered in a court of law these proofs may be partial, flawed, or distorted. Differing interpretations are likely to be drawn from them. But once entered into the record they become the subject of scrutiny, debate, and revision in the way novels seldom are, or should be. If history is simply a subjective construct and nothing but, all argument about the validity of the claims of a book like *Mein Kampf* appear to be pointless because, after all, it too is a “way of world-making.” Yet some historical novelists make a further, unreasonable claim that their representations are “truer” than standard histories because the artist’s intuition, or supposed mystical insights into the nature of the past are more likely to be “correct” than mere facts. This is an attitude so incomprehensible to me that

my only reaction to it is a dropped jaw. I made a feeble attempt in *The Englishman's Boy* to parody this attitude. A movie producer, Damon Ira Chance, gives another character, Harry Vincent, a long lecture about how to make successful movies. At the risk of boring you to tears, I would like to offer an extract from Chance's monologue to Harry Vincent, a young scenario writer. The encounter is described in Vincent's words:

Chance announces, "Americans are a practical people, they like facts. Facts are solid, they're dependable. The average American feels foolish when he enjoys a made-up story, feels sheepish, childish, a mooner, a dreamer. But entertain him with facts and you give him permission to enjoy himself without guilt. He needn't feel swindled, or hoodwinked, a hick sold a bill of goods by a carnival barker. He prefers to feel virtuous because he's learned something useful, *informed* himself, *improved* himself.

"You mark my words, Harry, there'll come a day when the public won't swallow any of our stories unless they believe them to be real. Everybody wants the real thing, or thinks they do. Truth is stranger than fiction, someone said. It may not be, but it's more satisfying. Facts are the bread America wants to eat. The poetry of facts is the poetry of the American soul.

"Of course," he qualifies, "the facts in picture making must be shaped by intuition." He

pauses dramatically. "I learned that at the feet of Bergson. I am a Bergsonian," he declares, a little like Aimee Semple McPherson might declare she is a Christian.

I haven't the slightest clue what a Bergsonian is, but it sounds vaguely like Theosophy, or something worse. "A Bergsonian?" I say.

Chance answers, ". . . Bergson taught that received ideas, habit, routine, turn a man into an automaton, a robot. What distinguished a man from a robot is not intelligence—presumably a machine might some day be constructed that could outperform a man in the rational faculties—but intuition. The intellect, Bergson says, is designed to apprehend the external world but cannot plumb the inner world of things. It's the wrong tool, Harry. Intuition has its roots in our deepest being, a being that we are scarcely aware of, and because we are scarcely aware of it, it remains our truest, most uncorrupted self. My intuition, my will, is the clue to my hidden self. Through intuition it is possible for me to penetrate whatever shares my fluid and changeable nature—other human beings, all art (and here Chance takes a lengthy pause for emphasis) history. Analysis puts a man outside the things he studies, while intuition puts him inside. Analysis therefore renders partial knowledge while intuition renders absolute knowledge."

Chance's admiration for facts was intended as a tongue in cheek warning to my readers to be aware of treating historical novels as being accurate or reliable as sources of *information*. There was, I thought, another caution embedded in Chance's lecture. I had also hoped to signal my disapproval of the movie producer's celebration of the primacy of intuition by depicting him as half-mad, messianic, and a megalomaniac. However, I failed miserably, at least with "artistic" types. On a number of occasions, individuals have approached me to congratulate me for arguing that intuition *is* a higher form of knowledge, a more perfect tool to grasp the real meaning of all human enterprises, including history.

Now while I would be the last person to argue intuition is inessential to any human activity, I am leery of the metafictionists' assumptions about the nature of history and believe they are mistaken to muddy the very real distinction between history and historical fiction on the grounds that both are "subjective." I also wish to raise the obvious point that historical novelists are very much indebted to historians, an intellectual debt they seldom acknowledge. Few historical novelists engage in primary research, but rely on works that are the fruits of historians. We are the pilot fish that circle the sharks, and nibble on the morsels left trailing in the water after the historians have taken their big bites from the subject.

On the other hand, I think it equally wrong to dismiss the historical novel because it does not employ the methods that apply to the writing of history proper, just as it would be wrong to complain that a history does not read like a novel, a frequent complaint of people who accuse historians of seizing on a vibrant subject, sucking the blood out of it, and offering nothing but a grey

corpse to the public, a corpse so dissected and autopsied as to be frightening in its lifelessness. To compare the two is to compare apples and oranges. They are not the same thing, and should not be. One of the obvious examples of difference is the approach that the historical novelist takes to research. As a writer of fiction I live and breathe minutiae, quirky odds and ends of information. For a novelist, it is not the devil that is found in the details. The details are where God resides. A novel cries out for texture to lend it verisimilitude. Characters need to wear clothes, eat, sit on furniture, read books, use tools, and have occupations. So I have spent innumerable hours searching out material on nineteenth-century firearms, medical treatments, reading anthropological monographs on native culture and religion, researching the cut and appearance of the uniforms of the Iron Brigade that saw action in the American Civil War on the side of the Union. A friend and I have bounced a four-wheel drive between Fort Benton, Montana, and the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan trying to approximate the likely route of the wolfers involved in the Cypress Hills Massacre, and I have tramped the ravines where the Battle of Belly River was fought, trying to form an impression of what it might have been like for the Cree and Blackfoot warriors who met on that field, to see the terrain they encountered, the sky and the river.

I have watched videos of all the films of the early American film maker D. W. Griffith, the infamous director of the racially charged *Birth of a Nation*, who naively believed that film would settle all historical disputes because every significant event would be recorded and preserved in vast archives of celluloid and hence argument and interpretation could be dispensed with, banished by fact, making history finally and irrevocably "democratic." Griffith

prided himself on historical accuracy in his movie making, and in the controversy surrounding the release of *A Birth of a Nation*, a film President Wilson was reported to have described as, “History written in lightning,” Griffith offered a considerable sum to anyone who could point out a single error in his depiction of Reconstruction and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. When a member of the fledgling NAACP asked him when did a black legislator in the South ever kidnap a white woman in an attempt to force her to marry him, Griffith failed to pony up the cash.

The Englishman's Boy is composed of two narrative strands, one set in the year of the Cypress Hills Massacre, 1873; the other, for the sake of symbolic resonance, half a century later in Hollywood. In that novel, I intended to have a movie producer assassinated outside a landmark theatre during the premiere of his film. What better choice than the iconic Graumann's Chinese Theatre? The problem was that I discovered Graumann's Chinese Theatre had not been built in 1923. However, I learned that Graumann's Egyptian Theatre was actually in service that year. I seized on this as a second choice. Unfortunately, it proved nearly impossible to find a picture of the movie palace that could provide a basis for my description of it. Obsessively, I searched for weeks, and finally discovered a reproduction of a postcard in a movie history that gave me enough details to sketch a portrayal.

Just as I felt I was required to visit the site of the Battle of Belly River, I felt it necessary to hunker amid the lodge pole pine in the Cypress Hills for several hours one night to listen to the wind in the trees, the sounds of small animals creeping about the undergrowth, to regard the prairie stars, and suffer a swarm of blood-thirsty mosquitoes to write a scene for *The Englishman's Boy*.

Historians may absorb such details as background and context for their work, but the novelist *foregrounds* these things, shifts them to centre stage, and spotlights them. I doubt that a historian of medieval religion would be prompted to scourge herself to understand the sensations of flagellants, but perhaps I am wrong. I do suspect if she took such drastic steps she would be an item of discussion among her colleagues.

Yet no matter how masochistically conscientious some historical novelists may be in their peculiar forms of research, they seldom treat research and sources in the scrupulous fashion of the professional historian. In fact, novelists have traditionally skirted the problem of evidence and accuracy by focussing on some dramatic, little-known incident whose principal figures remain largely unknown to the public, which is the strategy I adopted, by chance, after working on my play about the Spanish flu pandemic. The lack of evidence provided me with freedom. Lacunae provided room for fictional manoeuvring and invention. At heart, this choice is dictated by aesthetic considerations. A novel written about say—Abraham Lincoln—has the problem of struggling against widespread conceptions of who Lincoln was and what he signified, and any departure from the general view has enormous obstacles to overcome to become convincing. So my subjects have been the Cypress Hills Massacre and Jerry Potts, an incident and a person that have never been much documented or written about.

There is another consideration that claims the attention of the historical novelist—believability. In some instances, research provides a gift to the fiction writer. An account of a herd of buffalo crossing the Missouri in the 1870s could be incorporated into *The Englishman's Boy* with scarcely any alteration. On the other hand,

Donald Cameron, who travelled with the wolfers involved in the Cypress Hills Massacre and, who much later became a successful Canadian politician, offered me a first hand account of the men in his party firing on a bull buffalo, simultaneously breaking all four of its legs, and still being charged by the enraged beast. I wanted this incident in my novel, but I thought four broken legs would stretch any reader's credulity. I settled for one. I didn't want Cameron's report to seem so outrageously fictitious.

No conscientious historian would do what I did, that is doctor and amend a source. As a writer of fiction qualified by an adjective—historical—I was confronted with the problem, To what do I owe my primary allegiance? The demands of history, or the demands of the novel? In the end, I clearly opted for what I felt was necessary to ensure the artistic integrity of the novel. I entered the camp of Mark Twain who said, "First get your facts. Then do with them what you will." I decided the noun *novel* was more important than the adjective *historical*.

There are other instances of my choices being governed by the requirements of the novel. Early accounts of the Cypress Hills Massacre describe the Assiniboine chief Little Soldier's head being triumphantly paraded around on a lodge pole after the victory of the wolfers. Later writers discount this. But as a novelist, pursuing drama, it was the earliest account that I chose to use in *The Englishman's Boy*. More recent historical work suggests that a number of Assiniboine women were taken captive by the wolfers and raped, but in my novel I visited this indignity on a single young girl, chose to focus all the violence on her because given the constraints of space and the pacing of the narrative, it struck me that this would create a stronger, more horrific moment. These are

clearly artistic, not historical decisions.

Another matter that concerns the historical novelist is the language he deploys in portraying the past, whether or not it will seem to the reader as being true and authentic. This is not the concern of the historian, who has no need to draw the veil of illusion over his judgements, or to masquerade as an actor present at the events he describes and discusses.

When reading bad historical fiction what often struck me was how the characters often sounded ludicrous, wrong. Queen Boudicca in a metal brassiere, talking like Andrea Dworkin. How was I to avoid that pitfall in creating those serial voices that Wallace Stegner maintained were essential to effective fiction? While researching *The Englishman's Boy* I naively assumed that all those memoirs by cowboys, trappers, and traders that I had devoured would give me a model for my dialogue, but when I began to write the novel I was left with a sinking feeling. A passage from L. A. Huffman who arrived at Fort Keogh, Montana, in 1878, to take up a position there as post photographer will probably communicate my reservations. It's his description of someone riding a recalcitrant horse named Zebra.

Next thing we see is this wild man leadin' old Zebra out of the bunch with this hackamore of his. Now, Zebra, he's one of these splay-footed old hellyans that'll stand kinder spraddled, thoughtful and meek-like for saddling, never making a flounce until his man starts swingin' up; then of a sudden he breaks out er-rocketing', hoggin', sunfishin' and plowin' up the yarth for about seven jumps, when he

changes ends, caterpillars, goin' over back quicker'n lightnin' . . . He gives Twodot a savage look like a trapped wolf, tucks the loose coil of that hackamore rope into his belt, and just *walks* onto that hoss; never tries to find the off-stirrup, but stands high in the nigh one, a-rakin' old Zeeb up and down and reachin' for the root of his tail and jabbin' him with his heel every jump until he goes to the earth, feet upwards like a bear fightin' bees.

Now a good many of those who published reminiscences of the old West, such as Andy Garcia, spout language remarkably similar to Huffman's. They may have been influenced by dime novel Westerns they undoubtedly read, or perhaps average Montanans of the 1870s actually talked this gibberish. At this distance it is difficult to know. The problem is that this speech, even if it is authentic and correct, can only strike modern readers as parody, leaving them feeling like they've been dropped into the Mel Brooks' movie *Blazing Saddles* to be harangued by actors cranked on hallucinogens and mimicking Gabby Hayes, Walter Brennan, and Slim Pickens. As a literary language it is worse than inadequate, it is laughable.

What I settled for was an illusion of authenticity. So my characters all talk an artificial, invented language that I hoped the reader would swallow as historical. At one point in the novel the observation is made that nobody could place the Englishman's boy's accent. Little wonder, since he speaks a dialect that owes a little to Huffman and a little to Huckleberry Finn; just as my Hollywood scenarist, Rachel Gold's speech is an amalgam of

Dorothy Parker and Anita Loos; and my movie producer Damon Ira Chance's voice echoes Henry Adams' at his most magisterial, with an occasional shot of verbal laxative derived from H. L. Mencken.

When I came to write *The Last Crossing*, the problem was even more acute since most of the novel is constructed in the form of a series of first person narratives by an Irish immigrant, an American veteran of the Civil War, an Oxford-educated English painter, and an American frontierswoman. Again, I had little to go on in many of these cases, but in others, for instance the cultivated Englishman, I could make use of nineteenth century British novels and memoirs, etc., for a tentative model of articulation. But again, even Charles Gaunt's way of expressing himself had to be tempered and diluted, in a sense "modernized." To pattern myself too slavishly on even a great writer such as George Eliot, would inevitably read as noticeably artificial. So why did I run the risk of multiple first-person narratives? Because in my mind, at its heart *The Last Crossing* was about clashing perspectives conditioned by race, education, culture, and class, and to convey that convincingly I felt it necessary that all the characters, in Stegner's phrase, be "absolutely right," at least in their own minds. That is, they needed to see the world only with their eyes, and shape what they saw with their consciousnesses, to announce their judgements with conviction, and to appear to speak without mediation. It seemed necessary to me that their assumptions be individualized, expressed in the terms of their own lives and experiences. Although I hoped my hand in all this would remain hidden, I admit I was attempting to guide the reader's responses, but indirectly, not in the fashion of historians by laying bare their conclusions in summary, or by

weighing all pertinent evidence and subjecting it to rigorous, logical scrutiny. The historian is mostly interested in causation and consequence, the novelist in depicting these forces as they impinge on individual characters that are, in all probability, unaware of what is happening to them in the larger sense.

So what, if anything, is the justification for the historical novel? All I have for an answer is a handful of maybes. Maybe the role of historical fiction is simply to present the past as a textured, lived experience, experience from the “inside.” The single, authoritative voice of the historian is the voice of abstraction, analysis, generalization. It gives us what the nineteenth-century Italian historical novelist Manzoni described as what “men have performed.” But how they revealed their individuality, he says, “all this history passes by almost in silence; and all this is the domain of poetry.” In other words, this is the arena of serial, multiple voices that insistently remind us that historical abstractions were once acted out by flesh and blood, and that historical struggles were also once human struggles with much at stake. This view, I would argue, helps promote a stronger emotional identification with the past and encourages the feeling that history is not broken up into *then* and *now* but can also be regarded as an experiential continuum.

Centuries ago, the Italian philosopher of history, Giambattista Vico, posited a radical idea for his time. He stated that history derived from humble human origins and not divine providence. Historical fiction reminds us of these humble human origins. Or as the epigraph to my novel *The Englishman's Boy*, plucked from the Canadian historian Donald Creighton states, “History is the record of an encounter between character and circumstance . . . the encounter between character and circumstance

is essentially a story.” Some historians might dispute Creighton’s characterization of history as too simplistic, but for me it is the most apt description of the sort of fiction I endeavour to write.

For me, the historical novel is an idiosyncratic way of contemplating history and its possible meanings. The voices of the historical novel, in succession, and sometimes in opposition, ask us to remember that the past was never as clear, or as simple for those who had to live it as we might nostalgically imagine. The lesson of the historical novel simply may be that the past was every bit as problematic as the present, and why shouldn’t it have been—since past and present are so intimately linked? As well, the clamour of voices in the historical novel, all speaking their own brand of the truth, may prompt us to the realization that our understanding of the past needs to be won by our own efforts, that history is a subject to be thought through and pondered upon individually. In writing *The Englishman's Boy* I had hoped to issue a warning: beware of anyone who hands you history too neatly packaged whether it come wrapped up in histories, films, or historical novels.

And yet, despite the differences in approach, perhaps historians and historical novelists share more common ground than might be supposed. We both turn our eyes to the past because we think there is actually something valuable to be discovered there. When I was a student at the University of Saskatchewan, Hilda Neatby, the head of the history department, was a fierce critic of progressive education and its tendency to dismiss historical knowledge. In a polemic she posed this rhetorical question, writing, “It is the pride of the machine age that we can now understand, manipulate and control men as we do machines. Why should we look at the evidence of human

joys, sorrows, failures, and achievements in the past? It would almost be an admission of defeat.” In an age in which mammoth bureaucracies, faceless corporations, and vague concepts such as globalisation adopt the robes of divine providence and increasingly act as if human beings *are* machines, powerless to influence their destinies, history and historical fiction may help provide a sober second voice by reminding us that we live by our choices, both past and present. In an age in which political rhetoric and national diplomacy has become increasingly Manichean, increasingly simplified and reductionist in outlook, to insist on the complexity of the past is to insist on the complexity of the present. Perhaps the “evidence of human joys, sorrows, and achievements in the past,” whether expressed by the different means chosen by historians and historical novelists, is a worthy, and necessary work of the present moment.